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ABSTRACT

The American Square Dance became the official National Folk Dance of America by an act of Congress in 1982. Although the square dance contains some elements similar to the New England Quadrille, the Kentucky Running Set is thought to be the true foundation for its movements and configurations. The Running Set has been traced back to the source of all English country dances, the May-Day Round, and to early pagan ceremonials. The Square Dance evolved in the Appalachians, which were settled by people from Northern England and the lowlands of Scotland. A history is given of the evolution of the American Square Dance. The contents of the Congressional designation of the Square Dance as the National Folk Dance of America is presented, and it is noted that this resolution is ample justification for inclusion of contemporary square dance in the school curriculum. (JD)

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THE AMERICAN SQUARE DANCE - PART OF OUR NATIONAL HERITAGE

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The American Square Dance became the official American Folk Dance of the United States by an act of Congress June 1, 1982. Contemporary Square Dance as it exists in the United States today is as American as Dixieland music, cherry pie, and George Washington.

Yes, it has roots that go back to all of the countries those early immigrants left behind to come and settle in the New World, but American Square Dance as it exists today is truly an American invention. Lloyd Shaw in 1939 tells us that "when it comes to finding the origins of the Western square dance, for instance, one simply has to speculate." He goes on to tell us that it was very unusual for either calls or dances to be written down and that they were actually passed down from caller to caller by word of mouth, which makes determining authenticity difficult at best and almost next to impossible. Shaw (1939) made a great point when he said, "Had these Western dances been the dances of scholars, every variant would have been recorded and fully annotated." These were the dances of country folk who relied only on memory for the preservation of their heritage. Shaw (1939) went on to tell us in his research that he found the people a "secretive folk who were somewhat jealous of their special talent and special knowledge."

Shaw's 1939 theory was that the square dance of today came from two main sources within the United States, one was the New England Quadrille and the other was the Kentucky Running Set. Researchers of a more current vintage, such as Harris, Pittman, and Waller (1978), Jensen and Jensen (1973), and his wife Dorothy Shaw (1961), have all supported his original theories on the origins of square dance. Therefore, a quick look at these two probable sources of Contemporary Square Dance is in order.

The New England or American Quadrille was certainly a modification of many different European dances. However, France is usually given credit for the origin of the Quadrille. The Quadrille was usually danced in five parts, which is usually the tradition today. However, today parts might possibly be combined. One part of the Quadrille was called "The Visit" in which couple number one first did a figure with the couple on their right and then the next couple on around the circle in a visiting manner, just as was the case in Western Square Dance at that time.

This visiting pattern persisted in square dancing on into the 20th Century. However, figures began to emerge that involved two couples at once and often all four couples, instead of the traditional visiting pattern. Opposite couples began to dance with each other dancing in and around or with the inactive couples.

The New England Quadrille was very precise and left no room for individual creativity or a major "foul up" by the dancers. The early settlers needed something simple in pattern that they could learn quickly, be challenged, and still have an enjoyable evening. The New England Quadrille provided the square framework for the newly emerging Western Square Dance. One other major difference between the Running Set and the Quadrille was the numbering within the sets of eight dancers. In the Quadrille the head couple was number one, their opposite number two, instead of three, then the side couple to the right was number three, instead of two, and the side couple to the left was the same number as in the Western Square Dancing, number four.

Shaw told us that because the New England Quadrille was so well known, it was thought to be the primary source of Western Square Dance,

but he personally felt that the Kentucky Running Set was the "main stream" and the Quadrille only a "tributary." As one looks at the forms of Western Square Dance, it is easy to agree with Shaw, because the Kentucky Running Set was often danced as a square with four couples according to Cecil Sharp (1917), the great authority at that time on country dances.

Sharp came to this country in 1917 and discovered the Running Set of Kentucky in the Southern Appalachians and proclaimed it as one of the oldest and purest dance forms of England. He avoided the Running Set when first arriving here because he had heard it to be "a rough, uncouth dance, remarkable only as an exhibition of agility and physical endurance," according to Shaw (1939). However, upon an accidental viewing Shaw tells us that Sharp was fascinated totally with the beauty, aesthetic qualities, and historical significance of the dance. So much, that Sharp concluded that the Running Set was the earliest known form of English Country Dance and certainly preceeded any dance found in Playford's famous English Dancing Master in 1650, the earliest known book on English dancing.

Sharp traced the Running Set back to the source of all English country dances, the May-Day Round, and to early ancient pagan ceremonials. It was the early settlers in the Appalachians from Northern England and the lowlands of Scotland who would have nothing to do with Playford's dances of London. They had preserved their ancient country dance forms intact and here indeed was the missing link in English Country Dance according to Shaw (1939).

Shaw was not surprised as he pointed out how etymologists have said for some time that the phrases, words, and pronunciations of these

Appalachian hill people are pure Elizabethan English. The people often referred to as "hillbillies" have lived in their isolated and changeless world, preserving the pure English of Shakespeare and the country dances of the people at that time in history.

It is these Kentucky Dances that were certainly the early ancestors of American Square Dance and in particular Western Square as it existed at the turn of the 20th Century. The names of many of the dances, according to Shaw, were identical: "Lady Round the Lady," "Birdie in a Cage," "Ladies in the Center," and "Figure Eight." The couples in the Kentucky Running Set are numbered one, two, three around the circle to the right, just as in square dance, but not like the Quadrille, whose couples were numbered in opposite pairs.

The evolution of the Western Square Dance had a few more steps. Through the Ozark Mountains of Missouri, according to Shaw (1939), the Running Set still existed in yet another intermediate form on its way West where a separate and distinct form evolved to suit the needs of our early pioneers.

Though Sharp (1917) said that the Running Set was danced usually with eight people, as many dancers as wished could join the figure in couples in one huge circle. There was an introductory "circle left" call followed by the first couple moving out to the right and performing a called figure with the second couple and then moving on around the circle to perform the figure with each succeeding couple. As soon as couple one moved on to couple number four, then couple two followed out to the right to dance with couple number three. This pattern continued fast and furiously until all couples had had a chance to move out and around the circle.

The Western Square Dance included the courtesy movements (Honors), the bowing and saluting of the ladies, the right and left throughs, two ladies chains, etc., from the New England Quadrille, but as Shaw (1939) said, "I believe the Western dance stems back to the pagan ceremonials of our English ancestors by way of the Kentucky Running Set" and this writer feels that way also.

Shaw (1939) described the "Tide Comes Back" phenomenon in New England through a book by Beth Tolman and Ralph Page entitled The Country Dance Book. The dances that Tolman and Page described were freer, a bit more irregular, and a little more hilarious than their precise predecessor the Quadrille. What happened? Shaw (1939) surmised that "the modified Western dances were carried back to New England by returning sons, and the young people found them fun to do." When this happened, the rest is history and Tolman and Page got it in their book.

Fun is truly the best word to use when describing square dance, whether it be the old western style of one couple visiting around the circle or the contemporary style with two or four couples always active.

Lloyd "Pappy" Shaw's contribution to square dance cannot be measured quantitatively--it was enormous and to him we all say 'thanks!' He felt perhaps that one day all controversy over origins and forms of square dance would "quiet down to one great American folk-dance form." Little did he know that Callerlab/The International Association of Square Dance Callers would be founded to standardize contemporary square dance world-wide or that S. J. Res. 59 of the 97th Congress would be signed by President Reagan, June 1, 1982, designating the square dance as the national folk dance of the United States or did he know something back in 1939 that none of us others knew.

The contents of S. J. Res. 59 is worthy of repeating here:

"Whereas square dancing has been a popular tradition in America since early colonial days;

Whereas square dancing has attained a revered status as the folklore of this country;

Whereas square dancing is a joyful expression of the vibrant spirit of the people of the United States;

Whereas the American people value the display of etiquette among men and women which is a major element of square dancing;

Whereas square dancing is a traditional form of family recreation which symbolizes a basic strength of this country, namely, the unity of the family;

Whereas square dancing epitomizes democracy because it dissolves arbitrary social distinctions; and

Whereas it is fitting that the square dance be added to the array of symbols of our national character and pride: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the square dance is designated the National Folk Dance of the United States of America."

This document, signed by President Reagan, designating square dance as the National Folk Dance of America is more than adequate justification for inclusion of contemporary square dance and all of its ancestors in the curriculums of all our schools. A reminder to all is that we not forget the ancestors of our contemporary square dance, they can contribute a considerable amount historically, as well as contributing

significantly to the physical and social development of the participants. Finally, and it goes without saying, that the square dance may be "the great American dance" described by Shaw (1939) that will provide "an hilarious good time" as was the one wanted by the "virile youth" of our great frontier days.

Don't get locked into contemporary square dance, dare to be different, relive these "good old days" with the Lancers, Contras, Rounds, Quadrilles, and Running Sets, but above all else, enjoy it while you're doing it and make it fun for your dancers!

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AVAILABLE FILMS

A History of Square Dancing Pageant is a lively presentation depicting traditional square dance through contemporary square dance as part of the Bicentennial of the 25th National Convention in Anaheim, California. Contact Ken Parker, 426 Phillips Way, Vista, CA 92483.

A Visible Anthem, the story of Lloyd "Pappy" Shaw and his dream is a professionally produced film. Write Enid Cocke, Lloyd Shaw Foundation, 2217 Cedar Acres Drive, Manhattan, KS 66502.

Callerlab/The International Association of Square Dance Callers. Write to John Kaltenthaler, Executive Secretary of Callerlab, Box 277, Pocono Pines, PA 18350.

Legacy - another contact for additional films, write to Don and Vera Chestnut, 2149 Dolik Circle, Verona, WI 53593.

The 23rd National Convention, in full color and sound, was filmed in San Antonio in 1974. Write to John McCannon, 2811 Chisholm Terrace, San Antonio, TX 78217.